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Infusing Adult Learning Theory in a Traditional University Classroom: An Alternate Approach to Freshman Orientation

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Keywords: adult education, autonomous learning, independent learning

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to measure differences in freshmen expectations between the first and last days of a required 8-week orientation course. The course was taught using adult learning theory as a framework, incorporating adult learning principles as instructional strategies for a traditional population of learners.

Introduction

University freshmen are in a unique stage of life that embodies the definition of transition. Stuck in a period of time where they are considered adults who are just beginning to provide for themselves, new freshmen are thrust into a world that demands they make important life decisions with little room for poor choices. This is complicated by the fact that new freshmen are typically living away from home for the first time. Time management, study skills, and developing independence and autonomy are all skills new freshmen must acquire to enjoy success throughout their undergraduate careers. Universities play a role in helping them develop these skills and manage their expectations of their first year.

Previous research shows that there is a disconnect between first-year university students' perceived expectations and their actual experiences. This is due, in part, to inflated attitudes toward how they will adjust to the academic and social rigors of university life. But, universities also play a role in this by expecting new students to be independent learners, while stunting their ability by providing a rigid curriculum that may not encourage independent learning. Unrealistic expectations of both students and the university may impact the confidence of learners and therefore their ability to engage in independent learning. The university (administration, faculty, and staff) must work with them to identify and support realistic expectations, and create an academic environment that nurtures autonomy and encourages independent learning.

Background

Results from a university-wide survey conducted by Crisp et al. (2009) suggest there is "sometimes a significant difference between the students' expectations and the experiences institutions are prepared to offer" (p. 13). Pithers and Holland (2006) found that universities typically dictate information to students based on the university's expectations, not the expectations of the students. Smith and Werlieb (2005) found similar results in a study of first-year pre-business students by "showing a disconnect in students' prematriculation expectations and their actual first-year experiences" (p. 166). They found that students with academic or social expectations that were too high had lower first-year GPAs than those with just average expectations. Their findings also illustrate this disconnect by highlighting that college professors *expect* new freshmen to be able to engage in independent learning (emphasis added). In a study conducted at a mid-sized Midwestern university, Krallman and Holcomb (1997) found that differences in new students' expectations varied greatly between a pre- and post-orientation

experience. Their pre-orientation results showed that students “appear to be very confident in their preparation to perform college-level work and to participate actively in taking responsibility for their own learning. Post-orientation figures show a dramatic change in the students’ emotional reactions to whether or not they are prepared to do college-level work” (p.118).

Methods

Instructional strategies typically found in adult learning settings were employed while teaching this course. Specifically, the students were exposed to shared-authority by working collaboratively with the instructor to design the content and delivery methods for the course. Other examples include being asked to draw from their own experiences in high school and make conclusions about how their experiences would be different at the university, and experiencing self-directed learning by teaching themselves a portion of the content, and then teaching that content to the class.

Roundtable Discussion

Findings from this study highlight some important trends and reveal opportunities for future research. For example, expectations regarding mastering course material, effective management of time, ability to balance academic and other aspects of life, and living away from home changed throughout the 8-week course, as did their interest to engage in independent learning. During this roundtable discussion, participants will be asked to engage in a discussion regarding these findings and the implications for instruction in higher education.

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